FOR PARTICIPANTS ONLY

SD/EGM/FSAW/6
25 November 1983

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Expert Group Meeting on Forward-looking Strategies
for the Advancement of Women

28 November-2 December 1983
Bangkok

WOMEN'S STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

(Item 5 (f) of the provisional agenda)

WOMEN'S STUDIES IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC: EMERGING TRADE, GAPS AND RESEARCH PRIORITIES*

*This paper was prepared by the Asian and Pacific Development Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and has not been formally edited. The views expressed in it are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.

WOMEN'S STUDIES IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC: EMERGING TRENDS, GAPS AND RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Introduction

A major push toward studies with a specific focus on women's lives in the Asian and Pacific region was undeniably given by the International Women's Year (even though small numbers of such studies did flow in prior to the 1970s). Almost a decade has passed since, and over these years a fair number of studies, involving a diversity of themes, methodologies and academic disciplines, have emerged. It is therefore perhaps time that some assessment be made of the direction that such research has taken in the region, thus far, and certain priority areas be defined at least in terms of themes. In fact, such priority areas have, from time to time, been indicated in research papers, development planning documents, documents of international aid-giving agencies, etc. Inevitably, an attempt to define such priorities involves an element of subjectivity. But all said, a useful starting point is still provided by a consideration of women's studies in the general context of concerns expressed in social science literature, vis-a-vis the nature and direction of socio-economic development in the countries of Asia and the Pacific. A brief review of some of these concerns would clearly be of help in pin-pointing the significant issues relating to women.

The region we are looking at -- Asia and the Pacific -- is of course a diverse one, and even within the main geographic sub-regions (South Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, East Asia and the Pacific) socio-economic differences are apparent. In some instances, these differences are relatively small -- as in the case of South Asia and broadly Southeast Asia, and in other instances they are large -- as in the case of East Asia (which includes

countries as diverse as South Korea, China and Japan), and the Pacific (which includes both the relatively poor countries of the South Pacific Islands, and the highly industrialised ones of Australia and New Zealand).

Yet, if we were to exclude for the moment the highly industrialised countries of this region, such as Japan, Australia and New Zealand, and also West Asia, some common economic features do emerge: for instance (as seen from Table 1) with the exception of Singapore and Korea, in all the other countries listed, the population is primarily rural-based, with agriculture as its principal source of livelihood. This pattern holds all the more for the female work force. Further, in most of the noted countries, the pattern of ownership and control of land and other productive assets is highly unequal, making the consideration of class relations a matter of primary importance. Also, since the mid-1960s in particular, some significant new direccions have emerged in the economic development of these countries. Among the notable ones are the emphasis on the so-called green revolution strategy for agricultural development in most South Asian and Southeast Asian countries; the increasing shift from subsistence to cash cropping, in both Asia and the Pacific; the expansion of the manufacturing and service sectors; and especially the spread of manufacturing within free trade zones under multinational corporation control in several countries of Southeast Asia and to a lesser extent in South Asia.

At the same time, there has emerged a gradual recognition that many of these changes, which have added to the rates of growth of GDP of these countries, have in most cases not led to the expected "trickle down" of the fruits of development to the poorest sections. (As seen from Table 2, by existing estimates, in many of the countries in the region, over 45% or more of the rural populations are below the poverty line.) In fact, evidence

indicates that there is even likely to have been a worsening of the conditions of the large section of the poor in many of these countries. This recognition has both followed and been followed by a major focus in social science literature, especially from the early seventies, on issues concerning poverty, employment and income distribution, and related to these, issues of the choice of appropriate technology, uneven development (both internally and internationally), the negative effects of international dependency on underdeveloped countries, etc.

However, what is also striking about the bulk of this literature is the almost total neglect (until very recently) of the gender dimension. By and large, these studies throw no light on questions such as: How have women been affected by the noted directions of developmental changes? Have they been affected in ways distinct from the men of their socio-economic class, and if so, how and why?

Posed in this way, the area opened up for research is vast and complex. It covers both the need to understand what is the direction of change, and what the directions of change are likely to be, vis-a-vis women of different socio-economic classes. These areas, in broad terms, could be identified as:

(a) women's access to employment, education and training

(b) women and technological change in agriculture and industry

(c) women and the overall strategies for agricultural and industrial growth

(d) women and poverty (including the issue of female-headedness and women's access to productive resources)

(e) women and migration (especially poverty-induced migration)

(f) women and the family (especially the intra-household distribution of work loads, income and consumption items, including food)

(g) women and decision-making in both the private and public spheres

(h) women's struggles, organisations, associations, unions, etc.

(i) women, state policy and planning

(j) women and the international economy.

Some of these aspects would, of course, be of less concern than others in the context of particular countries in the region. The rural/urban focus would likewise need to vary by country. Also, there would clearly be inter-linkages between many of the noted aspects. For instance, women's educational/training level would be linked with their employment status, and both of these could have implications for women's role in household and community decision-making. Again, when the issue of women and technological change is being considered, it would be necessary to examine the implications for employment, work, poverty and so on. Intra-family relationships and distribution would impinge on each aspect.

Literature falling within the scope of women's studies, in the region, has to some extent sought to tackle several of these aspects, both at the conceptual and the empirical level. This paper seeks to provide a broad overview of the direction that women's studies have taken, the extent to which the themes tackled by existing literature cover the noted areas of concern, and the gaps which remain. For this overview, reliance has been placed primarily on material from annotated and other bibliographies, articles reviewing the literature, articles reviewing women's studies in specific regions, and lead articles on the topics indicated. The overview does not claim to be comprehensive or exhaustive, but it seeks to provide basic pointers. (For a comprehensive overview, a detailed review of literature relating to each region,

by country, would need to be undertaken.) Some issues concerning the methodology of women's studies will also be discussed.

An Overview

From a review of women's studies in several selected countries of the Asian and Pacific region (viz., India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Kore, Fiji and Papua New Guinea) what is apparent, on the one hand, are the differences between the countries, and between the sub-regions within which the countries fall, in the volume and range of available literature on women, as well as in the coverage of critical issues and in emphasis. In terms of the sub-regions, within the ESCAP regions, for instance, women's studies are seen to be still in their infancy in some areas, as in the South Pacific Island countries, but moving towards a degree of maturity in others, as in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Within these sub-regions, again, some countries are found to lead in terms of the volume of material available and the diversity of aspects covered, as India in South Asia, and Indonesia and the Philippines in Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, certain common features in the broad directions that women's studies are taking in the region are noticeable, as are the overlaps in the aspects on which there is a dearth of literature. One trend which is apparent is the gradual move towards primary data based, micro-studies with an analytical problem-focused and hypotheses testing thrust, in contrast to the predominance in earlier years of largely descriptive studies which used base line data to provide a macro-picture of the status of women in the country. Most countries of the region, with the possible exception of some of the South Pacific Island countries, have by now a reasonable number of studies providing basic, gender-specific information and analysis on demograpic

aspects, educational levels and occupational distribution.) In some sense this move from the macro to the micro, from the general to the particular, may be seen as a natural development, since an initial description and macro-analysis provides a necessary base, and also sometimes throws up hypotehses that can often be tested or explored fruitfully only in in-depth micro-analysis. (Aggregative macro-perspectives often obscure underlying contradictory trends and effects.) At the same time, it is necessary to keep the macro-perspective in mind, and to refer back from the specific to the general and from the empirical to the theoretical.

In most countries of the region, while the trend towards micro-analysis is noticeable, it is still very much at the beginning stages, and many issues remain unexplored. One general lacunae of significance lies in the dearth of studies which focus on the implications for women of planned or unplanned changes and shifts within the economy. An obvious example is the issue of technological change in the agricultural sector. In contrast to the prolific literature in the South Asian sub-continent and even in many South-east Asian countries, on the socio-economic implications of the new agricultural technology on different classes of households, there is hardly any literature on the implications by gender. To the extent that some recent studies have a gender focus, the main emphasis is on women's work in the fields. Sometimes this is the sole aspect studied.

This is inadequate. Technological change needs to be viewed within a much more comprehensive framework from a variety of angles, taking into account aspects such as:

(a) the effect on women's <u>total</u> work burden (including field-related work and non-field work), health, access to and control over family or personal income, access to household consumption items, and participation in household decision-making;

(b) possible conflicts in interest between women of different socio-economic classes, with any given technology;

(c) the impact of the technology on the overall agrarian structure such as through shifts in the pattern of land ownership and control, which may lead to the impoverishment of particular classes of households, and of the women of such households;

(d) the access which women have to knowledge of new technology and agricultural practices.

Existing studies have focused only on individual aspects. None are comprehensive even as regards covering the issues mentioned in (a). In this context, the likelihood of conflicting interests between women of different classes are especially important to take into account, where technology is labour-saving: such technology while saving the labour of women in the economically better-off households, often displaces women of labouring households for whom the work is a necessary source of income. This has been noted to have happened with the mechanisation of harvesting and threshing in several Asian countries. Again, aspects such as the effect of technological change on agrarian structures are necessary to keep in mind because the long-term implications of a technology might be quite different from the immediate short-term effects: for instance, the introduction of high-yielding variety (HYV) crops is noted to have an immediate positive effect on the demand for labour and thus has the potential for increasing the employment opportunities for the landless. However, in areas where the distribution of land ownership is skewed, as in South Asia, HYVs have often been accompanied by labour-displacing mechanisation and the eviction of tenants.

In general, it is important that both unplanned changes in the economy and those planned in terms of government policies and programmes (whether directed

towards women, or of a broader nature) be "monitored" to trace their implications for women of different socio-economic classes. (For an interesting discussion on possible approaches for monitoring changes in women's conditions, see Palmer and Bukhwald, 1978.)

Also, studies which focus on women need to keep, as a reference point, the wider socio-economic trends within countries (which are noted in the general social science literature). Many micro-studies examining the condition of women tend to be undertaken without such a reference point and within an essentially static and "isolated" context. This is especially true of many "case studies" which, while providing valuable and detailed data on women's work conditions in selected industries or occupations, often provide no conceptual and theoretical link to indicate the wider context within which the "cases" can be located.

In addition to the issue of technological change, and in some sense associated with it, are other aspects which have been inadequately explored in most countries of the region. These include: women, poverty and poverty-induced migration; women's work conditions in the "informal" sector; the incidence, characteristics and factors under-lying female headedness; and the intra-household distribution between male and female members of income and consumption items (especially the distribution of food relative to energy expended). Also, there appears to be a dearth of documentation on women's struggles for economic and social improvement in status, and for self-reliance and self-determination, either in the context of organised set-ups such as women's organisations, trade unions, etc., or outside that context.[1]

---

[1] Some attempt at documenting such grass-roots experiences in the Third World is being made by the ILO, Geneva, through a recently initiated project.

Apart from these gaps in the literature, what is also noticeable of the studies done in several countries, is the disproportionate coverage vis-a-vis the various regions within each country. In Malaysia, for instance, virtually every study is based in the Malay Peninsula, to the neglect of the regions of Sabah and Sarawak. In Indonesia, similarly, most studies are concentrated in Java. A conscious directing of research to the neglected regions is required to reduce this geographic imbalance.

Between sub-regions in the ESCAP region, there are of course likely to be differences in the particular emphasis -- rural/urban, agriculture/industry -- within which many of the critical issues identified need to be considered. For instance, a significant difference between South Asia and Southeast Asia is in the overall greater importance of the industrial sector as an alternative source of employment for women in the latter, rather than in the former. This refers to the rising trend in women's industrial employment, especially in the export-oriented industries, in Southeast Asia relative to the declining trend in women's industrial employment noted in parts of South Asia, especially in India. Hence, the urban context, plus the pattern and nature of employment and work conditions within the organised sector, assume greater importance in the ASEAN-region countries, relative to the South Asian countries. This does not of course explain or justify the relative neglect until recently of research on rural women, in some Southeast Asian countries with predominantly rural/agricultural populations.

While poverty may be a priority research area in several countries of the region, in the East Asian region, in countries such as South Korea, the issue of absolute poverty assumes relatively lower significance: as noted only 7% of the South Korean population is estimated to be below the poverty line. While the gender distribution of the poor still needs attention, issues such as

the implications of noted dramatic shifts in women's occupational structure in recent years is a much more striking aspect demanding exploration.

The strategy for growth, in most Southeast Asian countries and even in some East Asian countries, has been principally export-oriented, with strong inter-linkages with foreign capital and multinationals, compared with South Asia, and in particular with India, where the emphasis has been on import-substitution through indigenous capital investment. The form and degree of penetration of foreign capital in the economies of Southeast Asia relative to South Asia, therefore, differ. The role of foreign capital in the exploitation of cheap female labour also varies from the relatively more direct forms noticeable to Southeast Asia, as in the electronics industry of Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea, to the more direct links, mediated through local networks and middlemen, in many parts of South Asia.

In fact, given these differences, it would be important not merely to fill the gaps in research on certain critical aspects within countries, but also to promote cross-country, inter-regional comparisons. Existing studies attempting such comparisons could be classified broadly into two categories: those in which primary analysis of cross-country data has been undertaken, as, for instance, by Phongpaichit (1982), for the Southeast Asian region, and those in which the cross-country or cross-regional comparisons are based on a review of literature (e.g., Nelson, 1979; Agarwal, 1981; Whythe and Whythe, 1982; Eisold, 1982). Both kinds of studies are important and need to be undertaken more widely. For example, the noted differences in the ways in which foreign capital penetrates under-developed economies, the specific linkages between such capital and the host country, and how this affects foreign capital's ability to exploit female labour, would be an interesting subject for any cross-regional analysis, which could yield useful theoretical insights as well.

Finally, a few words need to be said on some methodological aspects. First, as noted, it is necessary to link the particular with the general, and to place micro-studies on women in the broader perspective. Second, existing biases in macro-data collection on women need to be reduced and where possible eliminated. As a number of studies have pointed out (e.g., Agarwal, 1982; Jain, 1982; Sinha, 1982) these biases are particularly noticeable in relation to the classification of women workers. One important source of bias lies in the definitions adopted which tend to categorise much of the work that women do within the home as "housework", even if it relates to activities such as food processing, cattle-rearing, etc., and which lead to most women being classified as "housewives". But biases also stem from respondents, wherein even when the women are earners they may be declared as "housewives" by their husbands, or may classify themselves as such, especially in communities where women's involvement in manual work outside the home is seen as lowering the family prestige. Respondent biases are aggravated by the fact that enumerators and respondents are typically male. All these factors lead to a considerable under-counting of women as workers in most countries.

Third, in some aspects, the macro-data base itself needs to be developed further. Singh (1980), for instance, points to the need to gather more detailed macro-data on women's migration patterns in India, where 77% of all rural migrants are women. She notes that much of female migration is assumed to be marriage migration, yet micro-studies indicate that women often migrate for work. As a more general point, micro-studies can often be very useful in raising doubts about the accuracy of macro-data, and need to be used as a reference point in refining definitions, concepts and perceptions vis-a-vis women, in the collection of macro-data.

Fourth, women's studies need to be seen not merely as another aspect of "academic" research. In so far as they are meant to provide a better understanding of the nature and causes of women's oppression and subordination, it is necessary on the one hand that the content of the research is such that it can be of some relevance in improving the condition of the women studied, and on the other hand, the way in which the research is conducted should not be "oppressive" to those researched. On the latter point, an important issue is the relationship between the researcher and the researched, when primary data is collected. This aspect has significance from two angles: (a) the degree to which the social scientist can identify with the people whose situation is being studied, can make a crucial difference to the quality of the data collected. Such identification in fact implies establishing a non-hierarchical relationship with those researched. While this could apply to all social science data gathering, it becomes especially important when those researched are women, in order to gain an understanding of the hidden and invisible dimensions of women's lives, be it the nature of the work undertaken by them, especially in the confines of the home, or the nature of their relationships with the men of their household. Such research also holds the potential for the voices of the women studied to be heard and their points of view recorded. (b) The establishment of a non-hierarchical relationship with those researched is important if the research is not to recreate oppression in the research content, by reducing those researched to the category of "objects" (see also Mies, 1978, on this point).

A related aspect is the need to ensure some back-flow of information about the research findings to those researched, so that the information gathered can enable the latter also to get a new understanding of their situation. Research designed with the possibility of such a return flow of

information is also more likely to be of social relevance. (Mies, 1978, also emphasises some of these aspects and raises several other points of interest with regard to the methodology of women's studies.)

Fifth, women's studies can play a significant role in expanding the scope of theoretical research in the social sciences. For instance, the attempt among Western feminist scholars to understand the basis of women's oppression and subordination and the forms it has taken historically, has helped to highlight many of the limitations of existing, theoretical frameworks offered in the social sciences. Likewise, the attempt to determine the value of women's labour time spent in activities within the home has pointed to the limitations of many of the existing tools and models for making such an assessment. Women's studies have, in this sense, opened up new areas for theoretical work, and provided perhaps one of the strongest critiques of several accepted doctrines in the social sciences in recent years.

However, much of the theoretical work in women's studies has emerged from Western Capitalist countries, has drawn upon the experience mainly of advanced capitalism, and has been undertaken largely by Western scholars. The body of work that has thus emerged is undoubtedly valuable in throwing light on several aspects relating to women's subordinate position, which would be common cross-culturally. But there is also a need for a greater Third World focus in such work and of the involvement of Third World scholars, to evolve locally relevant concepts and theories, taking account of the specificity of certain social structures (for instance, the issue of caste in India) in the context of the historical and current experiences of their countries.

Table 1: Some Features of the Population and Labour Force in Asia and the Pacific

	% Rural to total population*	% Economically active female population**	% Distribution of the active female population by economic sector (1970)**			Per capita Incomes US$ (1980)*
			Agriculture	Industry	Services	
South Asia						
Bangladesh	89	12.1	90.9	3.7	5.4	130
India	78	26.2	80.7	10.8	8.5	240
Nepal	95	38.5	96.8	1.3	1.9	140
Pakistan	72	5.7	69.3	16.0	15.7	300
Sri Lanka	73	17.0	65.6	12.9	21.5	270
Southeast Asia						
Indonesia	80	20.8	64.9	11.3	23.8	430
Malaysia	71	21.5	68.1	9.4	22.5	1,620
Philippines	64	23.3	35.2	16.8	48.0	690
Singapore	0	20.6	3.1	33.7	63.2	4,430
Thailand	86	42.6	83.8	4.4	11.8	670
East Asia						
Rep. of Korea	45	24.2	60.0	15.2	24.8	1,520
Japan	22	40.1	26.5	26.1	47.4	9,890
Pacific						
Fiji	63	18.0	51.2	27.1	21.7	-
Papua New Guinea	82	-	-	-	-	780

Sources: * World Bank (1980): World Development Report 1982, pp.111-112, 148-149; and Ward and Proctor (1980):

** ILO (1978): "Women's Participation in the Economic Activity of Asian Countries", Document No.DPW/16, Training Seminar on Development Planning for Women, Bangkok, Thailand, September 14-October 25, 1978, pp.3, 8.

Notes: 1) "Economically active" refers to participation in production of goods and services; unremunerated housework is excluded.

2) The distribution of the active female population by economic sector usually excludes persons whose situation is not clearly defined or who are seeking work for the first time; in a very few cases unemployed women workers are also excluded.

Table 2: Rural Poverty and Inequality in Asia

Country	Period	Rural Population below the Poverty Line		Rural Gini Coefficient for Income Distribution	Gini Coefficient for Land Distribution
		% of Total Rural Population	in millions		
Bangladesh	1973/74	94	64.0	0.44	0.57
India	1970/71	48	207.3	0.38	0.63
Pakistan	1971/72	58	-	0.29	0.60 (1960)
Indonesia (all)	1976	50.2[a]	-	0.46 (1971)[d]	-
Indonesia (Java only)	1976	58.7[a]	-	-	-
Malaysia (West)	1970	45	3.2	0.46*	0.44 (1960)
Philippines	1971	64	17.1	0.47	0.51
Thailand	1975/76	28[b]	-	0.45 (1970)	0.41 (1971)
South Korea (rural and urban)	1976	7[c]	-	0.31 (1971)	-

Notes: * Relates to the whole country.

Sources: [a] World Bank (1979): Employment and Income Distribution in Indonesia, Report No.2378-IND, World Bank, Washington D.C., p.84.

[b] World Bank (1978): Thailand: Toward a Development Strategy of Full Participation: A Basic Economic Report, Report No.2059-TH, World Bank, Washington D.C., p.62.

[c] World Bank (1979): Korea: Rapid Growth and Search for New Perspectives, Report No.2477-KO, World Bank, Washington DC, p.46.

[d] Ranis, Gustav (1980): "Prospective Southeast Asian Development Strategies in a Changing International Environment", in New Directions of Asia's Development Strategies: Economic Growth Department, Institute of Developing Economies, Tokyo, p.4.

All other figures are taken from:

Asian Development Bank (1977): Rural Asia: Challenge and Opportunity, Praeger Special Studies, New York, pp.62, 64, 98.